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Back Into the Light at Long Reach Village Center

By Susan Kim, Staff Writer

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A few months ago, on a rainy night, Karen Hitcho attended a meeting near the Long Reach Village Center. When the meeting concluded, she said, "I had to walk through the space between the old Safeway and Stonehouse (the community center). I stepped in water up to mid-calf. I couldn't see anything."

At that point, the village center was in a valley of disrepair. With broken lights and a permanently clogged drain that created a lake of water in the walkways whenever it rained, the center wasn't attracting passersby, much less new businesses.

But on Oct. 1, Howard County purchased the office and retail space for \$5 million. Since, Hitcho, the Long Reach Village board chair, said there's been a world of difference.

"A week ago, I attended another meeting in the same circumstances — a dark, rainy night — but the alleyway was beautifully lit and the drain was clear," she said. "Those were simple repairs, but they made a big difference. We are very happy and very grateful to the county for working out of the box on this."

For years, the village center has passed between a series of private owners. "With each owner in this succession, the village center became more and more neglected," said Hitcho.

The most recent owner, before Howard County, was Long Reach Village Associates LLC, a corporation affiliated with Pikesville-based America's Realty.

The improvements, which are only the start of an envisioned major overhaul, have the community feeling, Hitcho said, "very optimistic."

'Reimagining' Event

At an Oct. 13 event that marked the official "reimagining" of the village center, Howard County Council Chairperson Calvin Ball said that many residents of the community still believe in Jim Rouse's original vision of the Columbia village centers as gathering places, where people can meet and build their community.

"I know that many of us have been concerned about Long Reach as of late," Ball said. "I can't tell you how good I feel about the bold and innovative step that we've taken as a community to come together to ensure that we not only turn the page on Rouse's vision for Columbia, but continue writing that next chapter."

The relaunch event featured a ceremonial planting of shrubbery and music performed in a space that will host future concerts, as well as other artistic endeavors.

During the past two months, county staff and contractors have cleaned, landscaped, painted some areas and undertaken other long-neglected maintenance.

Howard County has retained several firms to help improve the center. Paragon Commercial Property Management will serve as the property manager for the center, while Webb Management Services will conduct a review of arts facilities needs and examine how to build arts programming and create synergies among a variety of arts and culture organizations in the county that could potentially use the center for performances and other activities.

Community Input

Soliciting ideas from the community is an important part of the process as the Long Reach Village Center is redesigned, said Tom Coale, an attorney, blogger and former Columbia Association board member.

“The county has done a very good job of getting that process started,” he said. “They also need to leave a little bit of room for organic growth to find out what different businesses and arts communities they may want to bring to the center.”

Coale added that he believes county officials and property managers should not overly limit the spectrum of the kinds of businesses and organizations they consider. “We will need a nice catalyst for growth for the arts community, and for the local restaurants and investors who may see another opportunity in the Long Reach Village Center.”

As redevelopment plans are expanded, they will be presented to the Long Reach Community Association and the Howard County Council, and county officials said the plans will be developed with community input.

In the Safeway

Celebration Church — formerly known as the Long Reach Church of God — will purchase the space formerly occupied by Safeway, said Hitcho.

The 2,500-member church has pledged, she said, “that this will be a true community center.”

The church’s intent to purchase this space has community members creatively imagining additional opportunities, she said. “They are going to have a huge sanctuary which could double as an auditorium — a kind of Rouse Theater East.”

Several residents and some village board members have reservations about the church having what is considered an “anchor” position in the village center, said Russ Swatek, a Columbia Association board member from Long Reach.

But Swatek said he does not necessarily share those reservations. “From what I’ve seen of Celebration Church, they’re a good member of the community. They sponsor a lot of worthwhile events.”